

LIVE REVIEWS

USA

Grand ambitions

Das Rheingold Wagner
LOS ANGELES OPERA

After many years of rumours, dashed plans (including a George Lucas directorship) and high hopes, the Los Angeles Opera at last has a *Ring* Cycle to call its own, in season number 21, and to the tune of \$32m, give or take. And, as seen in this season's premiere of *Das Rheingold* – with the other three operas to come this season and next – the company is approaching Wagner's grand circus in high, surreal style, courtesy of the fervent and wild imagination of German director Achim Freyer. While the musical pieces of the production were firmly in place, and impressively dispatched, it was the staging which ultimately stole the show.

What has descended on the company's home turf of Dorothy Chandler Pavilion is 'Freyer's Ring', a fantastical and irreverent – but not at all irrelevant – reworking of Wagnerian dramatic dynamics, a vivid and slightly iconoclastic recasting of the mythological tale of Wotan's misdeeds. Los Angeles got a titillating taste of Freyer's hyper-visual and spatial inventiveness with his take on Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* in 2005, and *Das Rheingold* ups the ante on that production's memorable sensory massage. A well-used scrim remains in place in Freyer's design, as a means of filtering the 'reality' of what alights and floats on stage through colour overlays, dripping blood and, in a theatrical in-joke, a projection of a curtain. He deploys both high-tech and resourceful low-tech ideas, including the use of massive, furling folds of fabric to suggest atmospheric – during the floating Rheinmaidens' opening sequence – and later stormy elements, to suit.

With his placement of singers in



First impressions of LA Opera's Ring: (l to r) Vitalij Kowaljow (Wotan), Gordon Hawkins (Alberich), and Arnold Bezuyen (Loge)

MONIKA RITERSHAUS

jumbo costumes with added or distorted limbs, often suspended above the severely raked stage, Freyer conjures up touches of Lewis Carroll, post-modern psychedelia and, yes, George Lucas-like visuals. The dwarves' demimonde workshop and the perception-goosing, gravity-defying feats of figures in anything but grounded, stand-and-deliver positions can appeal to the child within, not to mention the *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* fan within. But the sum effect also achieves a new sort of Wagnerian sensibility, playing up the inherent mythic, rationality-banishing and dream-like qualities of the material.

As expected by now, the company's maestro James Conlon wielded a strong but flexible hand in the orchestra pit. As a whole, the cast is stellar, singly and in tandem. Notable vocal turns included Gordon Hawkins as the grotesquely masked Alberich, Ukrainian bass Vitalij Kowaljow as Wotan, Arnold Bezuyen as the devilish deal-broker Loge and Michele DeYoung in formidable form as Fricka.

With *Das Rheingold*, LA Opera's long-awaited entrance into the *Ring* suggests that the cycle may well be one of this company's grandest feats to date. It plays out like an elaborate, multi-faceted dream that Freyer had – channeling Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* notion in his own way – and has now thankfully shared with the waking world. To quote the earth

goddess Erda, late in *Das Rheingold*, 'a dark day has dawned for the Gods', but a bright day has dawned in terms of LA Opera's Wagnerian ambitions.

JOE WOODARD

By royal command

Roberto Devereux
Donizetti
DALLAS OPERA

At the Dallas Opera, Stephen Lawless' production of Donizetti's *Roberto Devereux* neatly chronicled the jealous intrigue surrounding Queen Elizabeth I. But no amount of drama on stage could compete with the tumult that had engulfed the company just days before opening night when George Steel, Dallas Opera's general director for three months, tendered his resignation and was named chief at New York City Opera, itself abandoned by Gerard Mortier last November. Rumours of Steel's departure swirled for weeks beforehand; his denials in the press served to heighten the shock when his intentions were announced.

So Donizetti's old-fashioned operatic heartbreak seemed a refreshing change of pace when *Roberto Devereux* opened. The company premiere was a sequel to 2007's *Maria Stuarda*, also overseen by Lawless. >>>